

# Introduction

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Children's experiences and the skills and characteristics they develop during the preschool years are critically important to their success later in school. What children learn between birth and the time they start kindergarten lays the foundation for their learning and development for years to come.<sup>1</sup>

The National Research Council recently released a comprehensive review of child development and early education. In it, national experts concluded that we previously underestimated children's cognitive abilities and the concepts they can understand if they are exposed to age-appropriate and stimulating learning opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

For children to reach their full potential during these early years, adults around them must provide an environment and experiences that promote growth and learning. *Foundations* is designed to help early educators, parents, and others do just that by describing the particular skills and abilities that are important for children's success and providing ideas for fostering their development.

North Carolina has had a long and significant commitment to providing quality early education and intervention services for our youngest citizens. This is evident in Smart Start, More at Four, and numerous other early childhood initiatives. Public schools have also made a significant commitment to providing early care and education services. More than 40,000 preschool-age children were served in public schools in 2003-04. The Preschool Disabilities Program has been mandated in all public schools since 1987. Title I

preschool programs, Even Start, Head Start, and Developmental Day Programs are other examples of the many ways our public schools are helping prepare children for success in school.

With this investment in early care and education has come an increasing need to examine important dimensions of school readiness. In June 2000, the North Carolina Ready for School Goal Team defined it in terms of the characteristics of children and schools that facilitate school readiness. Adopted by the State Board of Education and endorsed by the North Carolina Partnership for Children, this definition laid the foundation for the state's efforts to promote children's readiness for school and schools' readiness to receive them.<sup>3</sup>

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has led several additional efforts to support quality early education. *The North Carolina Guide for the Early Years* outlines recommended practices. The Emergent Literacy Projects are designed to improve literacy experiences in early childhood classrooms. The Memorandum of Understanding, signed in May 2000 by DPI and the Department of Health and Human Services, outlines key elements in promoting safe and healthy environments in all early care and education settings. *Learning Through the Eyes of a Child*, a best teaching practices guide published in 2002, specifies how classroom environments can promote children's learning.

North Carolina has worked hard to improve the quality of early care and education programs, both within public schools and in other settings. And while these efforts are important, one area has not been addressed until now: articulation of the specific skills and characteristics of preschool children.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bibliography, *Early Intervention*

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council, *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> C. Scott-Little and K. Maxwell, *School Readiness in North Carolina: Strategies for Defining, Measuring, and Promoting Success for All Children* (Greensboro, N.C.: UNCG Regional Educational Laboratory at SERVE, 2000).

Early educators across the state often asked, “What should I be helping children to learn before they start kindergarten?” While the *North Carolina Kindergarten Standard Course of Study* describes expectations for children’s growth and learning during kindergarten, early educators had no resource to help them set priorities for their preschool programs. This document gives them that tool.

This book is a companion to our earlier publications that describe quality early childhood programming. Its purpose is to help educators plan their curriculum. It is not a mandate or a litmus test for whether children are “ready” for kindergarten. Instead, think of the Widely Held Expectations as a lens through which to view the curriculum, the learning environment, and the everyday activities children experience.

The Widely Held Expectations that make up the central focus of this publication were created to provide a common set of age-appropriate developmental standards for children three, four, and five years old who are not yet age-eligible for kindergarten. They were written to include all children in preschool environments, taking into account their individual differences and uniqueness.

Ensuring that children are ready for school does not happen automatically. It is the responsibility of the adults in their lives to provide the environment and experiences needed to develop the characteristics described in the Widely Held Expectations. Building on the quality programming that already exists in our state, the hope is that this new publication will serve as a common vision for early childhood programs, as well as a resource for educators, parents, and others who care deeply about our state’s young children.